

artsignal

# Europa

Josef Šíma

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Object Report

April 2026



## Europa

Josef Šíma

oil on canvas

1927

73 × 100 cm | 28 ¾ × 39 ¼ in

### Overview

This 1927 painting represents a crucial moment in the artist's development, where he establishes a signature visual language by synthesizing mythological subjects, surrealist fragmentation, and a metaphysical atmosphere, creating an archetypal image that prefigures the concerns of *Le Grand Jeu* and his later, more abstract cosmic works.

Situated within the vibrant Parisian avant-garde of 1927, the painting engages with Surrealism's interest in myth and the subconscious while also showing a clear debt to the silent, enigmatic spaces of Giorgio de Chirico's *Metaphysical Painting*, ultimately carving a unique path that merges Czech lyricism with French intellectual currents.

The artist's work is undergoing a significant international reassessment, bolstered by growing institutional recognition, a major upcoming retrospective, and a strengthening market for key pieces. This particular painting is now understood as a canonical example of his unique contribution to modernism, appealing to contemporary sensibilities through its blend of myth, abstraction, and metaphysical inquiry.

### Sales Points

- Rare and pivotal work from a key transitional year
- Exceptional provenance from the Ingersoll Family Collection
- Counterpart to a version in a major museum
- Strong renewed market interest in the artist
- Appeals to collectors of Surrealism and Metaphysical Art
- Embodies the unique Czech-French modernist narrative

### Promotional Opportunities

- Leverage the compelling rediscovered masterpiece narrative
- Connect to the major upcoming Sima retrospective
- Frame within the Czech-French avant-garde dialogue
- Highlight the mythological and poetic themes for content
- Position as a bridge between figuration and abstraction
- Generate scholarship on Sima's alternative surrealism

## About the Work

Painted in 1927, *Europa* captures a pivotal moment in Josef Šíma's artistic development, six years after his relocation from Prague to Paris. The work exemplifies his transition from earlier, more structurally defined compositions toward a personal, lyrical abstraction deeply rooted in myth and metaphysics. It synthesizes his Czech avant-garde origins with the prevailing surrealist atmosphere of Paris, introducing key motifs like the cosmic egg and the fragmented female torso that would become central to his iconography. This painting demonstrates his growing confidence in forging a visual language that, while in dialogue with Surrealism, remained distinct and independent.

Created just a year before he co-founded the dissident surrealist group *Le Grand Jeu*, this work already reveals an affinity for the group's core concerns: dream states, poetry, and a philosophical quest for universal truths. Compared to his later, more atmospheric landscapes like *Reflêt Glacial* (1960) or *Jour Du Royal Bleu* (1968), *Europa* is more explicitly symbolic and figurative, albeit in a fractured state. The enigmatic combination of a classical body, a featureless ovoid head, and a swathe of blue fabric creates a powerful sense of dislocation and mystery, a quality he would later translate into pure light and form.

This specific version of *Europa*, an authenticated counterpart to the one held by the Moravian Gallery in Brno, underscores the theme's importance to the artist in 1927. The creation of multiple versions suggests a profound investigation into the mythological subject, reinterpreting it not as a linear narrative but as an archetypal constellation of forms. The work's deliberately smooth, almost detached application of paint distinguishes it from more gestural surrealist practices and aligns it with a more classical, metaphysical tradition, pointing toward his unique synthesis of modernism and timeless symbolism.

## Wider Context

Created in Paris in 1927, *Europa* sits at the intersection of several key European avant-garde currents. Although Josef Šíma was not a formal member of André Breton's Surrealist group, this painting clearly engages with the movement's core interests in the subconscious, myth, and the logic of dreams. The work's biomorphic abstraction and unsettling juxtapositions echo the experiments of contemporaries like Max Ernst and Joan Miró, but Šíma's approach is distinguished by a more considered, poetic symbolism over automatic processes.

The influence of Giorgio de Chirico's *Metaphysical Painting* is particularly palpable in the work's silent, theatrical atmosphere and its use of a fragmented classical figure. Like de Chirico, Šíma places his subject in a non-specific, void-like space, which amplifies its symbolic resonance and detaches it from a clear narrative. This connection is further strengthened by his intellectual circle, which included poets and philosophers interested in similar metaphysical and spiritual inquiries, culminating in the formation of *Le Grand Jeu* the following year.

At the same time, Šíma remained a key figure for the Czech avant-garde, acting as a vital link between the artistic communities of Prague and Paris. His work from this period was understood as part of an international modernist dialogue, but with a distinctive lyrical and philosophical bent that set him apart. While some artists were pursuing pure geometric abstraction (like his acquaintance Piet Mondrian) or orthodox Surrealism, Šíma carved out a unique space by creating a synthesis of modern form and ancient symbol that was both innovative and deeply rooted in archetypal imagery.

## Cultural Relevance

Josef Šíma's work occupies a significant, and increasingly recognized, place within the history of 20th-century European modernism. Europa is exemplary of his unique contribution: a lyrical, metaphysical painting that bridges Surrealism and a form of poetic abstraction. The themes of myth, transformation, and cosmic consciousness embedded in this work find renewed resonance in contemporary artistic discourse, which often explores spirituality, archetypes, and non-rational ways of knowing.

The artist's institutional standing has been consistently strong in Central Europe and France, with major holdings at the National Gallery in Prague and the Centre Pompidou. A broader international reassessment is underway, highlighted by the major upcoming exhibition *Josef Šíma: In-Between Worlds (2025-2026)*. This exhibition, featuring loans from numerous international museums, is poised to solidify his position in the global canon of modernism, moving him beyond a primarily Czech-French context and exposing his work to new audiences and scholarly interpretations.

## About the Artist

- Josef Šíma was born in 1891 in Jaroměř, then in Austria-Hungary, and died in Paris in 1971; Centre Pompidou records him as French by nationality, Czechoslovak at birth.
- He studied at Prague's School of Applied Arts in 1910 and at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1911 to 1914, where the British Museum notes training under V. Bukovac and Jan Preisler.
- During 1914-1918 he served in the military, and in 1919 he worked as an assistant at the Brno Technical School, where he also studied architectural engineering.
- He moved to Paris in 1921, a decisive relocation that anchored his long-term artistic identity between the Czech and French milieus.
- The British Museum records that in 1921 he also became a member of Devětsil, linking him to the leading Czech avant-garde network of the interwar years.
- Beyond painting, he translated French texts and contributed articles to Czech avant-garde journals, showing that his role in modernism was also literary and intellectual.
- In 1928 he became a founding member of *Le Grand Jeu* with René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, and Roger Vailland, a key context for his dialogue with poetry, metaphysics, dream states, and alternative surrealist currents.
- Recent scholarship for the 2025-2026 exhibition *Josef Šíma: In-Between Worlds* stresses that he did not fully subscribe to any single dominant trend, instead combining avant-garde experiment with literary, philosophical, and traditional pictorial concerns.
- That same exhibition frames his Paris years through exchanges with figures including Max Ernst, Piet Mondrian, Giorgio de Chirico, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, and Pierre Jean Jouve, underscoring the cosmopolitan and cross-disciplinary sources of his language.
- His mature imagery is associated with mythology, archetypal natural forms, crystals, the cosmic egg, female torsos, landscapes, and cosmic symbols of human destiny, culminating in visionary, often near-abstract compositions.
- Christie's describes his work as dreamlike and quasi-abstract, often shaped by spiritual or mystical associations of nonfigurative painting and by an interest in purified geometry reminiscent of Mondrian.

**En Mouvement - 1959**

Josef Šíma  
1959  
Oil on canvas  
89 × 116 cm | 35 × 45 5/8 in

Artcurial, FR  
Art Moderne &  
Contemporain  
Apr 2026

Price  
USD 715,805  
Estimate  
USD 211,554 - 329,084

**Jour Du Royal Bleu**

Josef Šíma  
1968  
Oil on canvas  
162 × 114 cm | 63 3/4 × 44 7/8 in

Christie's, FR  
Art contemporain - Vente du  
soir  
Jun 2023

Price  
USD 864,219  
Estimate  
USD 267,925 - 375,095

**Reflêt Glacial**

Josef Šíma  
1960  
Oil on canvas  
162 × 130 cm | 64 × 51 1/8 in

Christie's, FR  
Art Contemporain  
Jun 2014

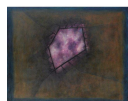
Price  
USD 443,559  
Estimate  
USD 177,151 - 245,286

**Paysage Avec Le Triangle**

Josef Šíma  
1932  
Oil on canvas  
145 × 97 cm | 57 1/8 × 38 1/4 in

Christie's, FR  
Arts de l'Orient et des Indes  
du XIème au XXIème siècle  
Provenant d'une collection  
française  
Mar 2007

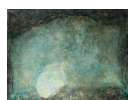
Price  
USD 315,240  
Estimate  
USD 39,405 - 52,540

**Métamorphose IV**

Joseph Sima  
1966  
Oil on canvas  
81 × 100 cm | 31 7/8 × 39 3/8 in

Sotheby's, FR  
Contemporary Art  
Dec 2009

Price  
USD 196,125  
Estimate  
USD 73,870 - 103,418

**Lieu de l'absence, 1959**

Josef Šíma  
1959  
Oil on canvas

Artcurial, FR  
Art contemporain 1  
Oct 2007

Price  
USD 203,615  
Estimate  
USD 57,152 - 71,440